

Why Study Sexual Harassment?

Incidents of sexual harassment remain a challenge in the contemporary work place. Thirty years after the passage of the milestone 1964 Civil Rights Act, complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment have persisted. [Note: It was not until 1976 that a federal district court found that the discharge of a female employee for rejecting the sexual advances of her male supervisor constituted sex discrimination in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Thus began the legal recognition of sexual harassment.]

Sexual harassment, a form of sex discrimination, is illegal behavior. Sexual harassment impacts employee job performance, decreases work force morale, impairs the agency's image and reputation, and violates USDA and MRP policy.

In **1981**, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) issued the results of a study it conducted to determine the extent of sexual harassment in the Federal work place. [U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Sexual Harassment in the Federal Government: An Update, a report to the President and the Congress of the United States, June 1982.]

The data, which was extracted from more than 20,000 questionnaires, revealed that:

- ! The incidence rate of sexual harassment in the Federal work force is widespread - **42%** of all female employees and **15%** of all male employees reported being sexually harassed.
- ! The impact and cost of sexual harassment to the Federal Government is sizeable - an estimated minimum of **\$189** million over the 2-year period covered by the study.
- ! Although their experience did not change the careers and work situations of most victims, a sizeable number of women and men left their jobs or suffered adverse consequences.
- ! Victims and supervisors are generally unaware of available formal remedies; those that are aware of formal remedies are generally skeptical about their effectiveness.
- ! Assertive informal actions are thought to be the most effective way employees can make others stop harassing them sexually.
- ! Most victims and supervisors think there is a considerable amount management can do to reduce the occurrence of sexual harassment.

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In **1987**, MSPB undertook another study of sexual harassment in the Federal work place. [U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Sexual Harassment in the Federal Government: An Update, a report to the President and the Congress of the United States, June 1988.]

This follow-up study revealed that:

- ! Despite an apparent increase in the level of sensitivity about what behavior may be considered sexual harassment, there was no significant change since the last survey in the percentage of Federal employees who said they had received such unwelcome attention.
- ! Of those responding to the survey, **42%** of all females and **14%** of all males said they had experienced some form of sexual harassment. Within USDA, **36%** of the female respondents and **13%** of the male respondents reported having experienced some form of sexual harassment.
- ! During the 2-year period from May 1985 through May 1987, sexual harassment cost the Federal Government an estimated **\$267** million. This cost is in addition to the personal cost and anguish many of the victims had to bear.
- ! Of those responding to the survey, **44%** of female victims and **25%** of male victims took informal action by simply telling the harasser to stop. In over **60%** of these cases, both males and females said it "made things better."
- ! Since the 1981 study, victims of sexual harassment now have a much clearer and more formally described set of actions available to them.

Because of the pervasive and persistent nature of sexual harassment in the Federal work place, as documented in the MSPB studies, Congress, as well as regulating agencies of the Federal Government, have seen fit to pass laws and regulations prohibiting sexual harassment in the work place and requiring agencies to take affirmative steps to prevent its occurrence.

Sexual harassment continues to be of concern to the USDA and MRP. The MRP Administrators annually issues an Administrative Notice concerning the prevention of sexual harassment. It is important for managers, supervisors, and employees to understand what sexual harassment is, what behaviors constitute sexual harassment, and how to prevent its occurrence.

This Guidebook is one of several ways MRP is addressing the issue of sexual harassment in the work place.